Use it or Loose It
D'var Torah Parshat Va'era

My three year old niece likes to stick her foot in her mouth. Not metaphorically, which is something I do all the time, but she actually likes to grab hold of her foot, right or left it doesn't matter, and stick it in her mouth. I discovered this while we sat together on the sofa after Thanksgiving dinner. She had just had a bath (her feet were very clean) and I was reading her a story. I turned to show her the picture and there she sat, munching away on her extremely cute little foot, tiny toes peeking out the sides of her mouth. I sat there totally grossed out, and in utter amazement! How did she get that foot in her mouth?

I read recently that at birth human beings are the most flexible and limber they will ever be. If you've ever watched babies as they wiggle and stretch, arms and legs are almost interchangeable. They can put a foot behind their head, they can grasp both feet with one hand -- an infant is more flexible than silly putty. But this doesn't last forever, around age eight the flexibility of the human body begins to lessen and while it is possible to maintain a youthful flexibility until well into your twenties, if children do not stretch and tumble at least 20 minutes a day they will begin to lose some of that flexibility. By age 16, if they fail to maintain a daily regimen of stretching, their youthful limberness will be lost forever. The body will just never be able to bend and contort as it once could. No matter how much tai-chi, yoga, isometrics, and Pilates my niece does, as she grows, her ability to stick her foot in her mouth will be gone forever, though like her uncle she will have a lifetime to do it metaphorically.

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In medical terms it is known as the "use it or lose it" rule. Through lack of practice the body loses the ability to do something that it was designed to do since birth. This same degeneration of flexibility happens to Pharaoh in this week's Torah Portion. In Pharaoh's case, it is not a physical rigidity and firming up, but an immoral hardening that only solidifies every time he refuses Moses' plea to free the Israelites from bondage.

The medieval biblical commentator, S'forno observes that the verb is reflexive; Pharaoh hardens his own heart in each of the first five plagues. Every time, in the face of each plague's overwhelming force and destruction, he is tempted to free the Israelites, and every time, at the last possible moment, he is unable to bend his own will, ***v'yach-bayd*** *lev Paroah* -- he is so stubborn, so set in his ways.

Nachum Sarna a modern biblical scholar sees this process as degenerative -- the hardening builds upon itself, with each successive plague Pharaoh hardens his heart to a still greater degree of inflexibility and stubbornness. Before the first hardening, Moses and Aaron came before him with great signs and wonders. They turn the Nile to blood, they cause a staff to become a serpent, but still Pharaoh thinks his own powers can match those of God. He hardens his heart and will not concede.

When frogs fill the land, Pharaoh is shaken. He pleads with Moses to remove them, but when they are gone, his pride and his stubbornness return. Again he hardens his heart to the Israelites and they remain in bondage.

And so it goes, with each successive plague, with each new and debilitating punishment Pharaoh, is tempted to free the Israelites, but time and again pride and stubbornness prevent him. Pharaoh is so consumed with his own inability to weather

God's divine storm, that he has lost the ability he once had to compromise, to cut his losses, to bend. In Sarna's words, "Pharaoh's character has become his destiny."

It is in Pharaoh's growing inflexibility that we find a *mashal* for each of us. We are reminded that "use it or lose it" does not only apply to muscles and joints but to character and compassion as well. As hard as it must be to teach the body to bend in ways it has forgotten to bend, *kal v'homer,* it is harder still to teach the mind and heart to feel and care in ways to which it has been closed off to for so long. Perhaps we all could use this parsha as a reminder of how to bend.

To bend our feelings towards those with whom we are in conflict.

To bend our schedules to accommodate those who don't necessarily demand, but still deserve our time and attention.

To bend our routines, to add variety and spontaneity to both our personal and professional lives.

To bend our minds to new ideas and opinions.

To bend our hearts to embrace those from whom we have grown distant.

Not only does this parsha implore us to be more flexible in our lives, but to do so right now, every day, before we wrap ourselves so tightly in our pride, in our stubborness, that to change will take more energy and effort than not to change at all.

My niece will stop growing physically in approximately 15 years, but I pray that her heart never stops growing in compassion and love, consideration and kindness. Indeed, the Psalmist taught - "Teach us to number our days, so that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Pharoah did not hear these words and instead stiffened his heart,

v'hihazayk lev. But let us listen to these words and heed them, so that each new day we will gain a *lev chadash*, a new heart, with boundless energy; a new heart open to change. A new heart willing to bend. *Kein yehi ratzon*, may it happen in our day.